COMMUNION MEDITATION
For the First Sunday in Advent
Isaiah 11:1-10
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Each of us has, tucked away in our imagination, a picture of the Nativity. That picture has been assembled on the basis of information from several sources:

- other picutres of the Nativity, for instance,
- or, perhaps most important, the story as it was told to us as children,
- or the music and other literature of Christmas...

The story is told of a firsr grader who was asked by his Sunday School teacher to draw a picture portraying the birth of baby Jesus. He attacked his assignment with great enthusiasm and soon proudly presented his masterpiece: crude representations of a man, woman, and baby, cows, sheep, and in the corner a conspicuous rotund figure which was really just a circle with stick-figure arms and legs. The teacher was fascinated: "Who might that be?" she asked. And he answered, "Why, that's Round John Virgin."

Of all the customs of Christmas, few are more precious to us than the creche. In quality they will range all the way from the child's crude rendering to the magnificence of the Masters. In sophistication they span the distance between a $1.00 set of plastic figurines to the gorgeous life-sized figures designed and painted by a Taiwanese artist and presented as a gift of love to a church I once served. The vulgar and the sublime, always sharing the same space at Christmas, are expressed and celebrated in our universal fascination with that long-ago scenario in a Bethlehem barn. It is, someone has suggested, the one Biblical scene everyone recognizes.

Of the four Gospel accounts Mark, the earliest, and John, the latest, do not mention the birth of Jesus. Matthew concentrates on the Magi and their machinations with Herod and tells us only that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. It is from the third Gospel that we hear a more complete story. Luke mentions the census, the fact that the inn was full and that Mary's new baby was laid in a manger. That's all we have to go on: no mention of stable, cows, sheep, angels - just a manger; a feed box for animals, sometimes made of wood, sometimes hewn out of stone: sometimes located in the yard, sometimes in a cave, sometimes on the ground level of a building, sometimes in a stable. All of which is to say that the elaborate reconstruction of the Nativity which we have in our mind's eye is the result of deduction: - in the case of the little boy in the story, erroneous deduction.

Francis of Assisi, in 13th century Italy, by the way, is credited with putting together the first creche. It included a manger, two cows and a donkey, installed in a dug-out cave in the side of a hill. Francis assumed that the picture was not complete without the animals. And I think that the source of that part of the image is much older than the Nativity itself, extending far back into history - to an ancient vision of God's Kingdom on earth experienced in terms of tranquility and peace and reconciliation even among the beasts of the field.

In short I am suggesting that the Advent Creche is related, rather directly, to the image conveyed in our Scripture Lesson this morning, in the eleventh chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.

The time was the 8th century B.C. The kingdom of Israel was beginning to feel the heavy hand of Assyria and watched as the Assyrian armies made a symbolic gesture of showing up near the border. The future did not look very promising. In this situation, an elegant man of letters who was also a prophet of God, Isaiah, delivered himself of an exquisite vision.

From the stump of Jesse, David's father, new growth will appear. A king will arrive with the Spirit of the Lord resting on him. He will rule in a recognizably special way: the poor will be treated with goodness: the little people will receive justice. And as evidence of this remarkable reign, this invasion of God's Kingdom into the affairs of humankind, an idyllic state of affairs will appear in nature. Natural enemies will become friends: the hunters and the hunted will live together: danger will disappear: no one will hurt anyone else and a small child will be capable of presiding. It is a precious vision of unity and harmony and tranquility, of reconciliation permeating the whole created order: the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the kid, the lion and the calf, together bear witness to the new reality of God's Kingdom coming on earth.

That vision, out of the long-distant past, of the whole creation put right, is part of what the creche tries to affirm. The legend of the Friendly Beasts is more thatn children's literature. The cows and sheep and donkeys, ever present in our creches, are an attempt to affirm that there is cosmic significance to this birth. I think we know deeply inside ourselves, at a depth where longings and hopes can only find expression in art, that the tranquility of the Nativity is what God wants for His whole creation: that the modest assembly around a manger is a model of a world He created, entrusted to us, sent His Son into and which He will one day bring about in all its fullness: a world that is safe, and secure, totally peaceful, where no one needs to be afraid, or alone, or anxious.

In the meantime it comes at us as both judgment and promise: judgment first. Somehow, during Christmas, the mess we have made of things seems intolerable: poverty is more painful, alienation more devastating, war more inexcusable. We don't live in the kind of world reflected in the Nativity. Woody Allen cracks that "if the lamb ever lies down beside the wolf, he's going to have a rough go of it."

That ancient vision of peace is still notoriously elusive. A radio editorial on the day before Thanksgiving pointed out - rather smugly, I thought - that, compared to other years, this Thanksgiving is relatively peaceful. But peace is more than the absence of war. Something ominous is brewing in South Africa: the best efforts of reasonable men keep failing: Time Magazine covered it last week in what I could only describe as a "literary shudder". George Ball, in the Atlantic Monthly, holds up little hope apart from a terrible cataclysm. And even those brave initiatives between Tel Aviv and Cairo were met with scorn and derision elsewhere in the world.

Closer to home, the peace and tranquility of the Nativity judges all of us. Our life just isn't like that. A charming parody under the title, Parables for Parents and Other Original Sinners contains a section on the "Ideal Family at Church" - with which anyone who has had children - or been one - can identify. The picture is as idealistic as Isaiah's vision, or a Norman Rockwell print - sitting in a pew, benevolent smiles on parents' faces, a cherubic aura literally glowing from each young one. But thirty minutes earlier Junior had announced, "I ain't goin' to church." And in the car Dad snapped at Mom. And in the pew he's got an iron grip

on Junior's leg to keep him from kicking the pew in front. And the little girl is squirming and nudging a hymnal up out of the rack with her foot.

That's really more to the point, isn't it? We treasure the peace of the Nativity in spite of the fact, or perhaps because of it, that none of us has very much of it. And tranquility: what is about to happen in this culture, to our families, to each of us - is the categorical opposite of tranquility. Advent, if it lives up to prior billings, will be more like a free-for-all, chaotic foot race which will find us exhausted and gasping for breath by December 24.

Justice? Dare we even talk about it at Christmas? Justice - even handed fairness for all people with a definite tilting of the scales in the favor of the poor and oppressed - which is how the Bible has it: dare we invoke the idea at Christmas? In regard to the children in our schools? Or the family ejected from an apartment because there is no money for rent? Or the ADC mother for whom the government will no longer help with an abortion, while smiling benevolently on those who have the money to buy one?

The tranquility and peace and justice of the Nativity comes at us as judgment, but also as promise. The vision penetrates and makes us catch our breath precisely because we recognize it: we have seen it: we have known the blessed Kingdom of which it speaks - at least in part. It is a world coming, but also breaking in here and there. President Sadat and Prime Minister Begin did sit down together. Men of good will, will keep working in the halls of government and the tables of diplomacy for peace. On occasion we have known it and felt it even in our families: we are given just enough peace and tranquility to know that it is a reality. And justice: we are trying: slowly wrongs are righted: slowly and painfully our system of government bends its power and intent to the preservation and protection of the rights of each individual. We dare to embrace the vision of Isaiah, the precious creche, because we have seen it, through a glass darkly - to be sure, but seen it nevertheless.

We Christians are people of vision. No matter what history is doing to us at the moment we will not release our grip on the vision of a Kingdom always coming in our midst. And nowhere is our vision more eloquent nor dramatic than when we come to the Table of Communion.

Juxtapose the two for a minute: the vision of a coming Kingdom of peace, tranquility and justice - the picture of the Nativity - and the people of God, coming to Table, in peace, love and forgiveness breaking bread and sharing a cup together. As we admire the family and public creches this year we will be doing more than remembering a past event. In fact, deeply within us, we will be celebrating a present reality and a future hope. So at table. We remember our Lord Jesus Christ and the night He was arrested. But also we celebrate the present reality of His Kingdom, modestly, to be sure, but God's Kingdom: in the moments of grace we have been given and will be given in the next few weeks:as we give and receive the gifts of love:in the dear circle of loved ones and friends whose affection will bring new joy at Christmas: the experiences of bright truth which lie immediately ahead and which will once again confirm our faith and trust. We come to table celebrating a Kingdom which is always coming - in the future and always breaking into the present.

That is our vision: as old as Isaiah: as new as this morning.

An old Advent hymn asks -

"Hark, what a sound, and too divine for hearing,
Stirs on the earth and trembles in the air;
Is it the thunder of the Lord's appearing?
Is it the music of His people's prayer?"

It is both. So let us come to table - and lay hold again of our vision.

There shall come forth a shoot
from the stump of Jesse...
And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him.

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb
the leopard shall lie down with the kid
the calf and the lion and the fatling
together, and a little child shall lead them.

Amen.

Father, walk with us in the days ahead. As we make our preparations, help us to know the true joy of Your love. Be with us now as we come to table. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Note: The idea for this meditation and several of the references were found in The Christian Ministry, November 1977, Creches and Communion, by James W. White.